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Thoughts on Curating: How to Bring About a Shift in Perception

Screendance is growing worldwide. Every year more dance film festivals spring up; new courses in dance for the camera are added to college dance curriculums; and symposiums, workshops and panels take place all over the world. Despite this trend, screendance is still virtually unknown in American culture at large. In a country that leads the world in media output, with hundreds of cable TV channels, millions of videos uploaded online, and countless advertising messages, dance is very seldom recognized as having any role at all in mainstream media. The problem is that dance for screen is generally perceived to be part of another genre, be it a music video by Michael Jackson, a Hummer commercial, a reality show like *So You Think You Can Dance*, or an old movie musical by Gene Kelly. Screendance, as a separate category of media content, is all around, but effectively hidden in plain sight from the public's point of view.

Electronic media, simply called media¹ for the purposes of this paper, is an omnipresent element of our contemporary society. We are constantly bombarded with media messages, and increasingly our social interactions, communication techniques, and thought processes are altered by media, or take place in mediatized spaces. We have become a media-savvy culture, in which the average person can recognize the genre and conventional structures of any given media clip in a matter of seconds. Screendance, however, is generally unrecognized by the typical viewer. Through curated programs screendance works can be connected to a subject or convention viewers already know, and they could emerge from the background of other genres and become recognizable as part of a separate category of media content.

How to Shift Cultural Perception

The first step to bring about a cultural shift in perception for screendance is to raise awareness of the genre in the dance community. Even among dancers in the U.S., screendance is relatively unknown, and unexplored. Excluding documentaries, most dancers would be hard-pressed to name a current work of dance for the camera. In the contemporary dance world, those who have taken dance history in college may know who Maya Deren is, and perhaps Charles Atlas' work with Merce Cunningham, but beyond that, knowledge of the genre falls off abruptly. It stands to reason that if dancers in this country don't know what screendance is, the rest of the public is not likely to catch on.

Raising awareness of screendance in the dance community should not be difficult to achieve, because dancers are already embracing the tools of media in ever-increasing numbers. Theatrical runs are short, and performances are ephemeral. Videos are an essential tool for promotion, fundraising, and booking live dance performance. In addition to these, choreographers are utilizing web videos to keep their audiences engaged with their work in the long gap between performances. From many angles,

dancers today are finding media marketing a necessary tool to get their performance works made and shown. From here it is a small leap to get dancers interested in making work for expressly for the screen.

As more dancers become aware of screendance and incorporate it into their work, they will expose their audiences to the genre, and cultivate new enthusiasts. Simultaneously, more screendance content will be needed to attract attention and grow the interest of funders, producers, advertisers, and media consumers. For the genre to succeed, a large push will need to come from the dance community itself to meet the demands of today's mediatized society.

The Importance of Praxis

Screendance is being made in this country, but compared to the output and quality of work by dance filmmakers from other countries, the work of American dance filmmakers just doesn't measure up. Why aren't dance filmmakers in the US making more sophisticated work? I am not an educator and I have no experience teaching screendance, however for my curated programs I have thought deeply about ways of presenting the genre to best educate and inform my audiences, particularly dancers. I have found inspiration from a variety of social thinkers, educators, and media and performance theorists, but the person that has informed my concepts the most is the great education reformer Paulo Freire from his renowned treatise on education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (The Continuum Publishing Company, 1993).

For Freire, the way to raise consciousness among any group of people is by posing problems². This process of asking questions and raising problems, activates both students and teachers in a dialogue that brings about reflection and leads to future action. Freire calls this pattern of action-reflection-action praxis³, and it is through praxis that people engage in cognitive discovery of their lives that is transformative and empowering. From third world peasants to American dance artists, this process enables people to transform their daily realities and create lives full of meaning.

Looking at the problem of screendance awareness in the United States, it is important to look at the larger cultural landscape and where the dance community exists within it. The media is one of the most pervasive and powerful shapers of our culture today. The average American watches more than 4 hrs of television per day⁴, spends 15 hrs per week online⁵, and is exposed to hundreds of ads per day. Does the dance community exist outside of this reality? Of course not! A dancer or choreographer is just as susceptible to the media's influence as the average person.

What has been under-explored by dancers and scholars alike, is how the media affects their work. This question is rarely posed; however if it is, I contend that most dance being made today is influenced by the media a great deal. Many choreographers already describe their work as being "cinematic", in which they think in terms of pictures and cuts, more than conventional staging. The proliferation of video projection used in live performance also points to the infiltration of the media in many dance-makers' creative processes. Lastly, the large number of references to mass media that appear in dance

pieces – from parodies of movies, to dance moves taken from tv shows or music videos – is yet another indicator of the media’s influence on the dance community.

If dancers paused to reflect on the question of the media’s influence in their work, I believe that they would tap into a wellspring of knowledge that they already possess but were unconscious of before. They could use this new consciousness to create dance films and videos of their own that is sophisticated, progressive, and helpful in promoting dance to new audiences. Dance filmmakers would understand media conventions and how to work within them with dance. As a result, the quality of screendance being made in America would improve.

Curating from Without & Within

Curated programs can come from outside or inside a community. In relation to screendance I will characterize curating from the outside as *institution-driven*, and curating from the inside as *artist-driven*. Institution-driven curating is the most common method used for screendance programs today. In this model, experts affiliated with various organizations such as festivals, colleges and universities, art houses, museums, or galleries, decide program themes and choose which films to show. The artists and audiences play little if any active role in the selection process. A good example of this type of curating is the Film Society of Lincoln Center, which co-produces the Dance On Camera Festival each year with the Dance Films Association. Throughout the year the Film Society shows hundreds of curated programs on different themes⁶. At times they partner with other film organizations such as the Dance Films Association to bring in curated programs around different niche topics. They also generate their own curated programs on themes by director, country, political subject, genre, culture, or a number of other subjects. The result is wide-ranging programming that appeals to many different audience groups.

Institution-driven curating can be a very inspiring and successful way to promote a genre. Institutions have the resources and means to bring in work of high caliber and to expose artists and audiences to new ideas and styles that they would not have access to otherwise. Exposure to high-level work can give artists an entry point into a genre, so that when they begin working they can do so from an informed and knowledgeable place, rather than reinventing old concepts that have already been explored.

While institutional programs can have a very positive impact on a local arts community, they can also present some problems for fledgling genres like screendance. For one, institution-driven curating can tend to create homogeneity in emerging fields, and discourage innovation and experimentation. Large organizations have a great deal of economic and marketing pressure to fill seats and prove to funders that they are serving a wide audience. This pressure filters into the curating process and influences programmers to show work that they know will attract their core audience base. In the case of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Dance Films Association, the core audience for the Dance On Camera Festival is affluent, retired, ballet patrons. No matter how varied or exciting the entries are in any given year, the curators of the festival must take into

consideration the needs of this core audience base, and program a few ballet films to ensure sold-out houses. This will inevitably lead to dropping some exceptional dance films that may be pushing the boundaries of the form and could inspire a local art movement. In these types of institutional settings there is often little room for risk-taking, and as a result, institution-driven curating can dampen artistic innovation in an emerging field rather than cultivate it.

On the other side, there is artist-driven curating, which generally consists of small, more informal gatherings of artists who share and talk about their work. Some common types of artist-driven programs are salons, collectives, work-in-progress feedback sessions, informal screenings, zines, blogs, email listservs, and groups on social networks. A classic example of artist-driven curating is the Judson Dance Theater that formed in the early sixties as a collective of experimental dance artists interested in pushing the boundaries of post-modern dance⁷. They were given the meeting room of the historical Judson Church to conduct their investigations and present public performances. The work that resulted from these programs went on to fuel the modern dance community for decades to come, with generations of dancers and choreographers spring-boarding off of the ideas and breakthroughs of the original collective.

The advantages of artist-driven curating are manifold. Artists can learn from each other directly and this inspires true dialogue, in Freire's sense of the word meaning that transformation of the world is taking place through words (praxis)⁸. Jean Luc Godard would never have developed his unique and influential style without his competitive and close relationship with fellow French New Wave director, François Truffaut. Although they were very different in many ways, their artistic visions were honed and shaped by the intense dialogue and exchange of ideas they had with each other over many years.⁹

Artist-driven programs can lead to collectives and art movements that are stronger and more influential than any one artist could be on her own. Often these groups form to address problems that have been identified in the existing status quo. Then, as an artist collective gains identity and form, so too does the genre they represent. To continue with my previous example of the French New Wave, this highly influential art movement was born out of the critical discourse started by writers and cinephiles in the film journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*. These writers were seeking a new type of cinema that didn't exist in France at the time, one that married their love of low-brow Hollywood genre flicks, with more experimental, intentional, and referential nuances found in high art, all brought together by their strong vision of the director as auteur¹⁰. When these writers began acting upon their critiques, and creating work of their own, the French New Wave was born, and gave rise to a new era of filmmaking that completely changed the art form in much the same way the Judson Dance Theater group did for dance.

Unlike institutional programs, artist-driven curating is generally not expected to bring in revenue or attract large audiences. The small and informal nature of most artist-driven programs allows them to take bigger artistic risks and test out boundary defying experimental work without the fear of rejection in the market. While harder to maintain and sustain, artist-driven curating is also more free to boldly explore and promote new

artists and work that could eventually have a large impact on the art forms of dance and cinema as a whole.

The drawbacks to artist-driven curating are related to its small and informal nature. Without strong infrastructure and cohesiveness, most artist collectives and programs don't last very long. They naturally form and dissolve as cultural trends rise and fall with the times. To be successful, most artist-driven programs need strong leadership among its members and a well-established structure to keep them going long enough to gain traction and visibility. When a group does become successful and grows, it can face difficulties making the transition into a more well-established organization with institutional properties. Often these types of organizations are built upon the efforts and personalities of its originators, and these are not easily passed on or taken up by the next generation of artists.

Historical and Contemporary Examples of Artist-driven Curating

Some historical examples of artist-driven curating efforts that have succeeded and grown into artist-driven institutions are Jonas Mekas' New American Cinema Group, which became Anthology Film Archives, and Richard Linklater's Austin Film Society. Both Mekas and Linklater are filmmakers who started their initiatives in response to a lack of support for and community in their areas of interest in cinema. For Mekas, he and several fellow American avant-gard filmmakers were wishing for a museum dedicated to the art of cinema with an avant-gard sensibility¹¹. No institution of this kind existed in the United States at the time, and it was through a group effort and vision, that Anthology Film Archives came about. Today it stands as an important home for experimental filmmakers to show their work and be exposed to the lineage of avant-gard cinema upon which new work stands.

Linklater helped spearhead a group of local filmmakers and cinephiles in Austin, TX to form the Austin Film Society, a curating collective dedicated to showing films that weren't available to the general public. In 1985, their first screenings drew only a couple dozen people, but it quickly grew to draw hundreds, and by 1995 it was an important regional organization fueling a well-spring of local film artists with screenings, workshops, grants, and 100,000 sq. ft of production studios.¹²

In Linklater's speech at the 20th Anniversary of the Austin Film Society he summed up the unique power of artist-driven efforts when he said, "I think so fondly of everyone who has contributed, large or small, over the years and think of all of us as small conduits in the ever-renewing life force of cinema itself. That's why I don't think we'll ever die as an organization. You could take away everything, and along would come some new film freaks with the need to share their passion with the community and the knowledge that film is life-giving: you nurture it, and it feeds you back tenfold."¹³ This kind of passion and energy for the art form springs forth naturally from an artist, and this is why artist-driven curating could help jump-start the screendance movement in this country.

There have never been more ways for individuals to share and distribute their media content than there are today. With the rise of the internet, and the social media of Web

2.0, today's artist-driven initiatives are less inhibited by distance or financial limitations. Some recent examples of artist-driven projects for screendance on the internet are the social network *dance-tech.net* founded by NY-based dance media artist, Marlon Barrios-Solano, blogs such as my own *Move the Frame*, and email lists such as the *media-arts-and-dance* list moderated by Simon Fildes. These online forums are bringing together an international community of dance filmmakers who can interact and share work and ideas with each other easily and instantaneously. The result will be a more unified and cosmopolitan screendance community, where new entrants can feel part of an existing movement.

In addition to online social media, there are many off-line artist initiatives forming around screendance today. In New York, there is a bi-monthly artist salon called *The Dance Film Lab*, founded and moderated by dance filmmaker Zach Morris for artists to show their works in progress and receive constructive feedback from their peers. Morris facilitates the discussion using choreographer Liz Lerman's *Critical Response* method, which is designed to help artists receive information that is useful to them at any stage of their creative process. Symposiums are another way to bring artists together and narrow the community's focus around specific themes or topics. This *Screendance* conference organized by Douglas Rosenberg and the American Dance Festival is one obvious example of an artist-driven symposium which is helping our community to focus on the processes, practices, and effects of curating programs in this genre.

Kinetic Cinema

Despite the many new artist-initiated projects popping up for screendance today, there are relatively few artist-driven *curating* projects for the genre. Without intentionally setting out to create such a project, I was given the opportunity to curate a monthly series at a small blackbox theater in Tribeca called Collective:Unconscious. Drawing inspiration from Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, I wanted to get the large and vibrant dance community in New York to start thinking about the effects of media on dance, and by extension become turned on to screendance. What better way, than to invite these very same dance artists in and ask them to present their own takes on media and dance? In January 2008 I started the *Kinetic Cinema* series and invited a different guest from the dance community each month to curate an evening of films and videos that have inspired or influenced their work in dance.

To begin, I invited a wide cross-section of members from the dance world ranging from dance critics to choreographers, to veteran dance filmmakers. I gave them free reign to come up with their programs, as long as they felt personally or artistically connected to the work in some way. The resulting programs were always surprising and incredibly diverse. Brian McCormick, a dance critic for *Gay City News* and a professor at the New School, showed a program of experimental video artists including an excerpt of a beautiful video by Mary Lucier and Elizabeth Streb entitled "In the Blink of an Eye, Amphibian Dreams, If I Could Fly I Would Fly". Then he closed his program with a New York premiere of Second Life Ballet performing their version of *The Nutcracker* in real time in Second Life. Most of the people in the audience that night had never experienced Second Life, and it was an eye-opening experience for us all. All throughout the

performance people had questions and a long dialogue ensued with him and the Second Life performers about what this new quasi-live medium could mean for dance.

Two of the most inspiring programs of the series were curated by dance artists who had had little to no formal study of dance film and video. Choreographer Malinda Allen began making dance videos on her own a couple of years ago, and for her *Kinetic Cinema* program, she tapped into a great passion for dance on screen. Her program was framed as a primer for the aspiring dance filmmaker, and she showed all the videos that have taught her the most, ranging from YouTube hits like “Daft Bodies” a spinoff of Daft Punk’s “Daft Hands” video, to an excerpt from Busby Berkeley’s “Wonder Bar”. She closed the program with her own dance video, “Other Games” in which we could see how she drew inspiration from all of her previous selections. Sharing witty commentary, and fun stories, Allen’s enthusiasm for screendance was infectious, and afterwards everyone in the room seemed to be electrified and eager to see more.

Levi Gonzalez, a choreographer and dancer from the downtown experimental dance scene, had no experience curating a screening, nor making dance film work himself. For his *Kinetic Cinema* program he wanted to investigate what experimentalism means for dance on screen versus live on stage. This line of questioning led him right back to his own backyard, so to speak, because he began asking a bunch of his own dancer friends for video work. His call out to the community revealed that a surprising number of dancers within his small experimental dance circle were already investigating media on their own. He received a nice pool of selections: from first films by new dance filmmakers to ChameckiLerner’s “Flying Days” which received the Jury Prize at this year’s Dance On Camera Festival.

While still very small and informal, *Kinetic Cinema* has already shown potential to achieve its goal of shifting the perspective of dancers towards a greater awareness of media and screendance. Over the course of the first six months I saw many audience members who came for one specific artist’s program return again and again for programs by curators they didn’t know. Most of the artists who participated as curators also reported being enriched by the experience, and had a desire to curate similar programs in the future.

Several institutions have also grasped how the mission and concept of *Kinetic Cinema* could overlap and enhance their own activities. Collective:Unconscious is a non-profit organization that began as an artist collective in Lower Manhattan. As a presenter of film and performance art, they first approached me because they were seeking a way to bring more dance programming into their space. They see this program as a way of reaching out to the dance community, where they are less known. My current employer, the dance service organization Pentacle, has also offered to co-present the series. Being an artist-driven service organization, Pentacle sees *Kinetic Cinema* as a way to help them fulfill their own mission of meeting the evolving needs of dancers, which increasingly involves making media. The Dance Films Association has also embraced the series as a means of informing the local dance community about what they do. Despite the long history of DFA, it has a somewhat low profile in the New York dance community itself, and

through assisting programs like *Kinetic Cinema*, they can increase their recognition here at home.

The impact of the series has extended beyond the local area through writings I have posted on *Move the Frame* blog¹⁴ and sent out to my email lists. Almost immediately after I first spread the word, I began receiving a steady stream of correspondence from other dancers, curators, and producers who were interested in the artist-driven concept of the series. A partnership is in the works with a dancer in Los Angeles who co-owns a bar with a screening room in the emerging arts district of Culver City. Being a New York transplant, she has been seeking to unite the two dance communities and bring in some cutting edge work to inspire the LA dance scene. It will be a challenge to figure out how an exchange between the two cities could work, however at its core, the artist-driven curating concept behind *Kinetic Cinema* is easy to spread and reproduce in any dance community.

Conclusion

New art movements and genres don't get made overnight, but in the case of screendance, it is crucial to raise awareness and interest in the dance community first. Through curating initiatives that pose questions and engage artists and audiences in dialogue, we can facilitate praxis. This process involves leading artists to examine, critique and analyze dance in media, and also to make work of their own, thereby transforming and shaping the genre and, by extension, the world. Artist-driven curating is one proven way to galvanize an arts community and further the identity of an art movement. These artist-driven initiatives, while often underground and informal, serve as springs that feed into larger institutions, such as dance film festivals, museums/galleries, performance venues, and universities. It is in these small, seemingly insignificant ways, that we can move screendance into cultural prominence, and make dance relevant in today's mediated world.

¹ The definition of "media" in Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary is: *the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, and magazines, that reach or influence people widely*. In this paper I refer only to media that can be mass produced, distributed, and viewed as a moving image such as video, film, and television, in which dance can be seen.

² Freire, 60-67.

³ Freire, 68.

⁴ Television & Health. <http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html>, accessed 6/22/08.

⁵ The State of the News Media 2008, An Annual Report on American Journalism. http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2008/narrative_online_audience.php?cat=2&media=5, accessed 6/22/08.

⁶ <http://www.filmlinc.com/about/about.htm>, accessed 6/22/08.

⁷ http://www.judson.org/arts_dance.html, accessed 6/22/08.

⁸ On page 68 Freire defines *the word* as "the essence of dialogue itself" and goes on to write, "Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world."

⁹ Richard Brody, Onward and Upward with the Arts, "Auteur Wars," *The New Yorker*, April 7, 2008, p. 56

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_New_Wave, accessed 6/22/08.

¹¹ <http://www.anthologyfilmarchives.org/history/>, accessed 6/22/08.

¹² http://www.austinfilm.org/about_us/about-us, accessed 6/22/08.

¹³ Indie Wire. "First Person: Richard Linklater on the 20th Anniversary of the Austin Film Society", available at http://www.indiewire.com/biz/2006/01/first_person_ri.html; accessed 6/22/08.

¹⁴ <http://greatdance.com/movetheframe/screeningsevents/kinetic-cinema/>